DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 057 260 AA 000 753

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TITLE Student Newspapers in Transition.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 15 Dec 71
NOTE 4p.
AVAILABLE FROM Publications Department, American Association For Higher Education, One Dupont Circle, Suite 780, Washington, D.C. 20036 (1 to 10 copies $.15 each; over 10 copies $.10 each)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Activism; *Higher Education; *Newspapers; *School Newspapers; *Student Publications; Student School Relationship

ABSTRACT

The 1970s may someday be considered the period of independence for the collegiate press. More and more college and university newspapers are breaking ties with their institutions and moving off campus. However, many of these papers desiring independence also want financial support from their institutions without the administrative control that has traditionally accompanied such aid. Administrators as well as student editors can learn hard lessons about the dangers of complete independence by studying the ailing condition of most student-founded papers trying to challenge established student papers. (HS)

ED 057 260

RESEARCH Currents

December 15, 1971

ERIC HIGHER EDUCATION

Student Newspapers in Transition

by William L. Rivers and Leonard Sellers

In September, *The Daily Californian,* which had been the official student newspaper of the University of California at Berkeley for 98 years, moved off the campus and became independent. Is this another case of assertive Berkeley students pioneering for the cautious on other campuses? Not quite. *The Diamondback* of the University of Maryland went independent at the same time, and *Emerald* of the University of Oregon had announced *its* independence three months earlier. By some standards, California, Maryland, and Oregon have been timid. *The Cornell Daily Sun* has been published by an independent corporation since 1905, and several other student papers, notably in the Ivy League, have been independent for decades.

It is nonetheless clear that for the collegiate press the 1970s may some day be considered the period of independence. In addition to the papers that have recently struck out on their own, others are moving toward independence – or talking about it – on campuses all over the country, among them the University of Alabama, the University of Georgia, North Carolina State University, the University of Texas, Stanford, the University of Iowa, and Wisconsin State University.

The trend is not surprising considering the tide of activism that has led to greater freedom in everything from casual clothes to grading systems. Some administrations welcome the approach – and even promote it. At Stanford, President Richard Lyman has encouraged the *Stanford Daily* to move toward the independence that has been the stuff of dreams for editor after editor for several years. The staff members of the Maryland *Diamondback* may even now be asking, "Did we move or were we pushed?" They yearned for an independent paper. So did the Board of Regents, who *ordered* the paper to become independent.(1)

At Washington University in St. Louis, an editorial appeared in *Student Life* in 1970 lamenting that "the Board is going to shove this 'independence' business down our throats. . . . If the Trustees care about a better newspaper, they should give us more money and hire professional journalists to establish a journalism school at WU."(2) Disgusted with what one member called "massive tastelessness" in the *Minnesota Daily,* the Board of Regents of the University of Minnesota appointed a committee in 1970 to study the possibility of forcing independent status on the paper by removing student fee support.(3)

In the days when most college papers were combination bulletin boards and publicity organs for campus queens, administrative officials and regents (or trustees) were sometimes miffed and occasionally inflamed by editorial indiscretions. The governing boards of that time either knew how to handle "the upstarts" who took the First Amendment seriously or learned how to live with them. Now, however, with many campus journalists believing it their duty to analyze issues like abortion and communal living, advocate free pills for coeds from the student health center, write sympathetically about homophile movements, support student strikes, dig up data on university relationships with the Department of Defense, and poke about in tenure policies and the oligarchical tendencies of boards of regents and trustees, anyone who tries to put out all the fires springing from campus editorials would have little strength left for other burdens.

Wanted: independence and funding

There are compensations these days for trustees and administrators who have been burned so badly that they decide to give up and grant student editors the freedom they profess to want. One is that given the opportunity to publish independently, and the challenge it presents, many an editor decides that the world out there is a cold, wet place, and rather than leave the shelter altogether, he prefers to stand under the eaves. That is approximately the stance of *The Daily Californian,* which got into trouble last spring by urging students to liberate a small plot on the campus known as "People's Park." The liberation movement became a riot, and three editors were fired. Although the paper is now independent, it is partly sheltered by a university payment of $20,000 a year for 2,500 subscriptions. Independence is not impaired, but the university provides a subsidy that rival papers do not enjoy. Examining the status of several other independent college papers reveals that they are similarly subsidized, often by free office space and equipment.

Another compensation for the wounded is that the editors of many student papers that have been granted freedom from the university administration and are supported by funds from student government find that one authority structure may be as oppressive as another. In some cases, editors who thought

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AA 000 753

they could settle into a happy relationship with student leaders – who, after all, would be expected to share their concerns – have found that authority figures are authority figures even if they're only 20 years old. At Alabama, the Student Government Association denied funds this year to both student magazines and cut the budget of the newspaper, the *Crimson-White.* Despina Valentis, editor of the *Crimson-White,* reported that he and the magazine editors now favor direct funding by the administration.

At the Colorado School of Mines, the student council fired the editor of the newspaper for printing an obscenity even though the school president said he was willing to give the editor another chance. The editor claimed he was fired because of personality conflicts with council members.

Paper politics at San Francisco State

Chief problem for many papers linked to student governments is the activist student politician who is eager to seize power, especially editorial power. Although San Francisco State College is not typical, recent events there show in exaggerated form the forces that worked changes in some student newspapers and destroyed others.

In November 1968, nine members of the Black Students Union invaded the office of the San Francisco State College *Gator,* beat up the editor (who had to be hospitalized), permanently injured a part-time faculty member, and in a brawl with the staff nearly demolished the newsroom.

This was the culmination of long battles between the Department of Journalism, which operated the *Gator,* and Associated Student Government. Beginning in the late 1960s, radicals began taking over the government. The *Gator* was funded by student fees doled out by student officials, who demanded a voice in running the paper. They presented to the Board of Publications their own candidates for editor.

The editor had long been chosen by agreement of the *Gator* staff and journalism faculty members, with the Board doing little more than rubber-stamping the nominations. Board members were made uneasy by the challenge from student leaders, but they continued to approve the selections made by the staff and the journalism faculty.

Student officials then threatened deep cuts in *Gator* funds, charging that the paper was racist. Journalism teachers began to look for support among other teachers and administrative officials, and found none. It was clear that some who were asked for support were simply avoiding a fight; but others professed to believe that if the *Gator* was accused of being racist, it must be racist.

Then came invasion of the newsroom. Despite the injuries and damages, there was little disposition to support the paper. The administration was even reluctant to press charges against the BSU members. Knowing that it was only a matter of time until funds for the *Gator* would be cut drastically – or cut off – Dr. Leo Young, chairman of the department of journalism, visited the state capitol and cajoled state officials into promising funds for a laboratory newspaper for the department – but not until the following year.

Dr. Young moved ahead anyway, turning over to student government the name *"Gator"* and the label "official student newspaper." Using its own sharply limited funds, the journalism department founded a weekly laboratory newspaper, *Phoenix.*

The *Gator,* with its annual budget of $37,000, was taken over by student government, which was dominated by Students for a Democratic Society. The paper became a radical house organ paying its staffers handsomely by college standards but carrying nothing that could be defined as news. When the lengthy San Francisco State College strike began on November 6, 1969 (one year to the day after the invasion of the newsroom), the *Gator* was not so much a newspaper as it was a war cry. *Phoenix* was the only campus channel for objective coverage.

In the spring of 1970, the investigators for the State Attorney General discovered that student funds were being used to buy guns. The funds were then tied up by court order. Later that semester, in reaction to the strike – and perhaps because *Phoenix* coverage of student government turned up Tammany-like tactics – a conservative student government slate was elected. The new leaders (who had only a name because student government funds were still impounded) threw the *Gator* out of student offices. Without an official home, and with *Phoenix* launching an advertising sales drive that lured 90 percent of the advertising revenues, the *Gator* all but died.

Now, the *Gator* appears infrequently as a radical handout, and student government has started a four-page weekly tabloid, *Zenger.* Although *Zenger* has a university budget of $25,000 a year, it is so dominated by opinion pieces that most students turn to *Phoenix,* which has a budget of only $7,200, to learn what is happening at San Francisco State College.

These incidents suggest more than that abrasive relations between student politicians and student editors can become explosive. They also point to fierce factionalism. At the University of North Carolina, the Committee for a Free Campus Press urged students to withhold the $5.50 fee that supported the *Daily Tar Heel,* questioning "the right of the university to tax students for support of an institution with which they don't agree." (At the same time, the paper was the focus of two investigating committees, one appointed by the Student Legislature and the other by the Chancellor, both looking into *Tar Heel* funding.)

The factions are so dedicated to their causes on some campuses that they publish their own papers – many on such haphazard schedules that they are spasmodicals rather than periodicals. At Vanderbilt, *The Hustler* was long the only official paper. Then a conservative faction began to issue *Versus* as a counterforce. Its chief editorial point for nearly two years was strong opposition to the university subsidy to *The Hustler.* But *Versus* had such trouble publishing – even surviving – that the editors asked for financial help from student fees. *Versus* now receives $2 from each undergraduate.

Factionalism is part of the reason University of Missouri students can choose from what may be the widest variety of newspapers on any campus. The respected Columbia *Missourian,* which is owned by a non-profit corporation whose members are alumni and former students of the School of Journalism, is aimed at readers throughout the community of Columbia and Boone County. Journalism faculty members and students staff the *Missourian,* and profits go to the School of Journalism. The *Maneater,* the official student newspaper, has limped from twice-weekly to weekly publication after accumulating a debt of $17,000. There are two competing weeklies, *The Issue* and *The Courier,* both published off-campus. A fifth paper, *Blackout,* is published by black students and supported by university funds. In theory, *Blackout* is issued twice a month, but it does not always publish as scheduled.

All the above information was gathered from news stories and editorials in student publications, from interviews, and

from a correspondence survey of 50 colleges and universities conducted by these writers. The research literature on the student press is limited, and by reasonable standards most of it is uneven. Almost nothing that can be described as rigorous research has appeared to point the way through the current confusion, perhaps because the student press is changing so rapidly that researchers are hard put to carry out studies that will be valid by the time they get into print. Administrators and students must rely upon the careful studies that undergird the general subject of the student press rather than searching vainly for those that might provide guides to the future.

Some useful studies

Those contemplating independence, however, should consider several studies that focus on important areas. A useful study is "Student Press Revisited" by Jean Stevens,[4] who holds that three factors have prevented the student press from achieving broad press freedoms:

- Few campus papers have achieved the financial independence that might guarantee their autonomy.
- The established press has not fully committed itself to the cause of the student press.
- The courts have not yet determined the extent to which First Amendment guarantees apply to student publications.

This analysis springs from a wide range of studies and actions that are reviewed under these subheadings: Campus Press 1971; Free Press Principles v. Practices; Freedom and Responsibility; Conflict Analysis; Obscenity and Morals; Tax Exemption; Preventing Controls; Established Press; Ultimate Solution: Courts; and Conclusion. Like most Freedom of Information Center reports, "Student Press Revisited" is both thorough and succinct. Because nearly all the articles it cites were published in 1969, 1970 and 1971, it provides the best overview of recent studies and actions.

At this writing, the Stanford Workshop on Political and Social Issues (SWOPSI) is completing a fairly comprehensive report on the problems of independence for student newspapers. In three parts – Legal, Staffing, and Financial – it sketches central problems and relates the experiences of some of the papers that have become independent.[5] M.M. Chambers has compiled an excellent report on the court actions involving the student press.[6]

Another careful study which is useful for those considering independence is "The Student Press: Guidelines for College Administrators" by Annette Gibbs,[7] which may be as handy for student journalists as for administrators. Dr. Gibbs, associate dean of students at the University of Virginia, analyzed the studies and position papers issued by organizations concerned with college students' rights and responsibilities: the American Civil Liberties Union, the Journalism Association of Junior Colleges, the National Council of College Publications Advisers, the Commission on Freedoms and Responsibilities of the College Student Press, and the United States Student Press Association. She also analyzed studies made by the American Bar Association Commission on Campus Government and Student Dissent and the California Commission on Campus Newspapers, as well as the "Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students," which was endorsed by ten educational organizations. From all this and from recent court rulings, she developed ten guidelines:

1. The function of the college student newspaper should be clearly defined and agreed on by the students, faculty, and administrators within the college community.

2. The function of the college student newspaper, as it relates to student freedom of expression, is parallel with the function of the commercial newspaper, i.e., both serve to inform, educate, and entertain their readers.

3. The student newspaper should not be considered as an official publication of the college or university.

4. Students attending state colleges and universities do not forfeit their constitutional rights of freedom of expression.

5. Private colleges and universities traditionally have maintained constitutional independence in that they have been free to censor student publications; however, this private corporate status may now be challenged because of the vast amounts of federal and state funding that these institutions are receiving.

6. Student newspaper editorial policies that promote the lawful educational goals of the college or university are viewed as desirable by the courts.

7. A publications board, composed of students, faculty, and administrators, offers the best method for providing guidance and leadership for the college student newspaper activity.

8. Student newspaper editorial freedom of expression requires student responsibility for presenting news and opinion accurately, fairly, and completely.

9. A professionally competent adviser for the student newspaper staff is desirable for both students and the college administration.

10. The college student newspaper is primarily a medium of communication for students; other opportunities made possible for students who participate in newspaper activities, such as formal course instruction in writing and technical skills, are secondary.

The Student Newspaper[8], a booklet that was written as a report to the president of the University of California by his Special Commission on the Student Press, is also wide-ranging, recent, and useful. All of its nine chapters are worth the attention of anyone who is concerned with the student press. Melvin Mencher's contribution, "The College Newspaper," carries both the reflections of an experienced journalist who advises student journalists and the results of a survey he conducted on the financing and goals of college papers. William Porter's chapter, "What Should Be the Role?" is also valuable.

Key issue is editorial control

The central aspect of the push for independence is the problem of control. Who really runs the campus newspaper? A narrow and strongly focused study is "Control of Small College Student Newspapers" by Bruce Dudley, a survey of 177 small colleges.[9] Fifty-one percent of the respondents reported that their papers were under publications boards, and on 51 percent of *those*, students comprised a majority of the board membership. Two-thirds of the boards choose the editor. Ninety-four percent of all the respondents reported that their papers had advisers, but nearly half of these advisers (48 percent) read nothing prior to publication unless asked to do so by a member of the staff. Offsetting this, however, is the fact that 28 percent of the respondents reported that during the preceding two years someone other than a staff member had barred publication of at least one item or forced significant changes. The items were:

Response	% of Incidents
Criticism of administrative policy	44
Criticism of administrator or faculty member by name or title	22
Story about drinking, dope, sexual freedom, etc.	12

Humorous article poking fun at faculty and staff either in general or by name	12
Story about student crimes, on or off campus, giving names	8
Story about college disciplinary action against students, giving names	6
Possible site of new campus	2
You wouldn't believe it	2
Formation of Upward Bound program	2
Clash between society and independents	2
Interview of president	2
Criticism of editor of paper	2
Calling attention to problems not felt to be significant	2
General improvement	2
Criticism of catering service	2
Humorous article on food	2
News story on administrative changes	2
Lack of student response	2
Satirical column about students	2
Questionable ROTC program	2
Campus garbage	2
Story involving certification	2
No answer	2

The reader's vantage point

An area possibly overlooked in the trend towards campus newspaper independence is that of audience. How well read and trusted is the current newspaper, and would independence improve the paper from the reader's point of view?

Research on readership of college papers yields varied results, and not only because the papers themselves are varied. Some campuses are served by more than one student newspaper; and how well campus readers are served by student papers and professional dailies published off the campus often determines the readership of the official student paper. Vernon Wanty, dean of faculty at Middlesex County College, reported a survey of more than 1,000 students of a metropolitan community college showing that 50.8 percent of both freshmen and sophomores get most of their news about the college from the paper, with "student conversation" a fairly distant second (28.8 percent for freshmen, 37.2 for sophomores), and "president's talks" a very distant third (1.3 percent for freshmen, 2.9 percent for sophomores).(10)

At Stanford, a report based on 335 returned questionnaires revealed that "on any given day 75 percent of the students, 75 percent of the staff and 78 percent of the faculty will read the *Daily*."(11) The paper was voted the most important source of campus news. Frank Miller, news editor of the *Daily* and author of the survey, said that "Students generally felt the *Daily* was reliable in its news coverage; the staff generally agreed; but faculty were extremely critical of the newspaper's reliability – 51 percent feeling that it was below average." The administration-published *Campus Report* was rated more reliable than the *Daily*, the San Francisco *Chronicle* and the Palo Alto *Times* less reliable.

Students who responded to a survey asking their opinions of the University of Washington *Daily* in 1971 rated it more fair but less interesting than its predecessor.(12) They rated its accuracy, fairness, interest, and informational quality on the favorable side of "so-so." The students were more favorably disposed toward the paper than toward student government, with 96 per cent feeling either unaffected or unfavorably affected by student government actions. Like the Stanford students, they rated sports news low on their scale of interests.

At Bowling Green State University, the student newspaper contracted for a readership and marketing study with a senior marketing research seminar to evaluate the service to the community by *BG News*. The result is a comprehensive 15-page document.

Readership interest has been considered so important at several universities that press councils have been created. Louisiana State University and the University of Florida both have press councils made up of students, faculty and professional journalists. The councils have no power, but serve as a feedback channel for the newspaper. University of Florida editor Sam Pepper said: "I found the Council quite valuable. Many times I discovered stories which I considered of minor importance to be the ones which received the greatest readership."(13)

Conclusion

Recent research is so sparse and diffuse that it neither finds which direction the fast-changing student press is heading nor prescribes one. It is clear that "independence" is both a strong trend and a danger. The freedom is valuable, but the financial problems are sharp-edged. Administrators as well as student editors can learn hard lessons about the dangers of complete independence by studying the ailing condition of most student-founded papers trying to challenge the established student papers. Many of them represent single-issue journalism, which is seldom successful, and most are dying for lack of dollars.

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